

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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M. de Talleyrand (1870) Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869)

Overview Sainte Beuve and Talleyrand are both eminent public figures, though in very different senses. Sainte Beuve was a man of letters, maker of literary opinions through his personal voice and figure, while Talleyrand was a diplomat and man of state, representing the French government on the highest levels. First we note their complex temporal relationship. We bring the two men together, here, because of some provocative interrelations between their lifespans, and because Sainte-Beuve dedicated an admiring book to his predecessor, 'le diable boiteux,' the 'limping devil.'

We note first of all that Le marquis de Talleyrand (1754-1838) and Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) overlapped one another in lifespan for more than fifty years, while Talleyrand was older enough, say thirty years older, that his earlier lifespan exposed him to blocs of earlier historical events—the first challenges to monarchy, the beginning of exploitative Colonialism in Asia and South America, the adoption of Rococo and Baroque art styles—in the late Renaissance. In other words, Talleyrand takes us back to the memories of the early formative period of modern Europe. With the temporal juxtapositions of Talleyrand with Sainte Beuve—the author of Sainte-Beuve's 1870 book *Talleyrand*—the two men make their point of intersection all the more piquant. Sainte-Beuve's *M. de Talleyrand, 1870*, is a text which brings together the two eminent men, one (Sainte-Beuve) inquiring into the period of Talleyrand's greatest diplomatic eminence, the other (Talleyrand) inspecting human nature in terms of its future, not least in terms of the desuetude and complexities of life under monarchy. Talleyrand, as the master diplomat of high European affairs until 1815, caught Sainte-Beuve's eye as a fellow reader of the entire human condition. This was the point of genius of Sainte-Beuve, a consummate master essayist and critic. Nowhere will we learn better to understand the mental ins and outs of high cynical diplomacy than in Sainte-Beuve's good natured biography of Talleyrand. Nowhere than in Talleyrand will we find a more readiness to play the game of the world on its own terms.

Public Figures The two forces, with whom we have so far lingered, have had in common their turn toward the public, their readiness to speak for and of a wide community. In this the man of letters, Ste.-Beuve, follows the strong Catholic tradition of public declamation. (His training in Latin was rigorous and he brought unusual learning to his training in that language and culture.) From this background Ste.-Beuve will have imported, into his furtive and sinuous literary criticism, many turns of classical phrase. More significantly he will, like Talleyrand, have assumed a classical posture, as a public figure. It is this same classical posture which we can trace to the origins of French literature, which mark the character of French culture to this day.

Ste.-Beuve and Talleyrand were both steeped in *Romanitas*, the cultural outflow of Ancient Roman culture into the wider channels on which Europe was to be born. To be raised French, in the effluence of the culture established by the Caesars, was inevitably to have accepted the basic frameworks—legal, military, and social—that made the Empire some kind of unity for the carrying forward of the traditions of ancient classical culture. Can we not leap to the impression that a significant part of that effluence flowed down the rivers and up onto the Alps and upland plateaus of what was gradually to accumulate around itself the nomen *Gallia, France*. We are aware both of the language pockets and of the 'literary' landmarks that congealed to form the sense of *French* and at the same time of the *Roman* distinctiveness of tenor. We can through the veil of futurity hear rare text voices—tough like the Gallic Villon, sweet like Du Bellay, querying and dialectical like Montaigne, existential like Pascal—and come to understand that each one of them was riffing off of the *Latinitas*, which brought with it the backbone, the mother's milk for a single Haltung, that *Romanitas* which lay inside the Gallic.

Romanitas and Romanticism At such a point in the displaying of the outflow of *Romanitas* in language, we will grow closer to a mounting counter narrative, which arguably turns in on itself, and in and bears startling continuity of *Romanitas* in the language of the Loire Valley, and of the vast riverine chains which in the end tumbled down the French Alps into the Mediterranean.

The unsevered power of the Roman tradition in French will receive its first explicit challenge with the outbreak of the modern Romantic movement, which introduces into the formality of the Roman tradition new suppleness and imaginative freedom, which we have been heralding as we attempted to characterize the polarity of Talleyrand and Ste.-Beuve. I refer to the advent of the Romantic perspective, say as we find it heralded in Mme. de *Stael's De l'Allemagne* (1813), which reaches east to find the romance the writer found missing in the French tradition. German culture, Mme. De Stael insisted in her analysis of literary cultural Christianity, relied fruitfully on the Christian notion of passion, and beyond that of Confession, another of those deeply Catholic practices which invite the soul into self-expression and community. Concurrent with De Stael's argument, there were the suggestions—throughout the 'literary scholarship' of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—that the *aboriginal* was on its way to generating fresh language and culture—the kinds of innovation seeking freshness that thinkers like Rousseau were forever seeking. The immensely popular *Paul et Virginie* enforced a passion for nativist thinking in the nineteenth century, for which the hypersensitive cultures of Europe were taken to be too refined. But it was not only these turns to the Christian passionate, and to the nativist aboriginal, which promised new versions of imaginative freedom. It was the wide outpouring of French imaginative fictions, in the turn into the nineteenth century, which truly opened the floodgates of Romanticism into the French language.

We can measure our position and depth within a literary culture as we did by stretching a measuring rod between Talleyrand and Ste.-Beuve, or by feeling the temporal resistances that separated us from one another. (There was almost a tensile counterpull between Talleyrand and Ste.-Beuve.) *Romanitas*, within the structure of the French language, seems the dominant muscularity, along the lines of which the outward tensions of the language are exercised. By plotting ourselves along these multiple lines of force, within a language, we enable ourselves to distinguish the skills the language best enables us to discover. The greatest writers of a language are ultimately its greatest grammarians.